

Commercial Building
50-52 North Commerce Street
Mobile
Mobile County
Alabama

HABS No. ALA-784

(RECORD - NATIONAL ARCHIVES, COLLEGE PARK, MARY)

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

COMMERCIAL BUILDING

Location: 50-52 North Commerce Street, bounded by Commerce, St. Francis and Front Streets, Mobile, Mobile County, Alabama.
Geographic Location Code: 01-2100-097

Present Use: Demolished for Water Street Urban Renewal Project, 1972.

Statement of Divided in the center to form two equal sections, this is a
Significance: large commercial brick building with cast-iron decorative elements, typical of Mobile in the mid-nineteenth century.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: c. 1860-63
2. Architect: unknown
3. Original and subsequent owners: As indicated in the following chain of title, a double four story brick store stood on this site until at least 1851. By 1860, the land had been cleared and a new building erected by 1863. Reference is the Probate Court Record Division, Mobile County.

1851 Deed February 8, 1851 in Book 2 page 433

Trisham B. Bethea

to

Anselm A. Haden

"...in consideration of the sum of dollars...do grant
...all that double four story brick store and lot of
ground..."

1860 Deed March 24, 1860 in Book 14 page 489

Anselm A. Haden

to

McDowell, Withers

"...in consideration of the sum of...(\$11,500)...do grant
...all that lot of land...at the northeast corner of
Commerce and St. Francis streets...being the same lot
sold by T.B. Bethea to A.A. Haden..."

1863 Deed March 20, 1863 in Book 18 page 221
McDowell, Withers et al
to
Francis Poe
"...in consideration of the sum of...(\$30,000)
...grant...all that lot of land and the improvements
thereon..."

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1863 Deed April 1, 1863 in Book 18 page 223
Francis Poe
to
Balthazar Tardy
"...in consideration of the sum of...(\$15,000)
...grant...all that one undivided one-half
interest in...that certain piece...of land with
all the improvements thereon..."

1870 Deed May 2, 1870 in Book 28 page 335
B.R. Tardy
to
Felix McGill
"...in consideration of the sum of...(\$9,500)
...grant...that undivided one-half interest in
that certain...lot of land, with all the improve-
ments thereon..."

1870 Deed June 14, 1870 in Book 28 page 336
Elizabeth Poe
to
Felix McGill
"...at which said sale...McGill became the
purchaser of the said land so ordered to be
sold, and described as follows...one undivided
one-half interest in the store and property...
for the sum of...(\$9,100)..."

1897 Deed in Trust March 12, 1897 in Book 82 page 219
Felix McGill et al
to
McGill Institute
"Whereas it was the purpose of my brother, the
late Arthur McGill, to found in the City of Mobile
an institution of learning, wherein Catholic
young men should receive free of cost the advan-
tages of a literary, commercial, industrial,
and technical education...have furnished the
site, erected the necessary buildings and equipped
the same for school purposes...and do grant..."

(also)...that certain lot of land situated on the northeast corner of St. Francis and Commerce Streets, having a front of...(32')...on Commerce and a like front on Front Street and extending in depth...(80')... through to Commerce Street..."

1941 Deed April 7, 1941 Book 307 page 68
McGill Institute
to
W.M. Meader

1945 Deed November 1, 1945 Book 385 page 474
William Meader
to
Ruth Meader

1952 Deed December 9, 1952 Book 567 page 138
Ruth P. Meader
to
Canvas Products, Inc.

B. Sources of Information:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Mobile Deed Books, Probate Court Record Division, Mobile County

Lewis Troost Map (c. 1840), City Hall, Mobile.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Bird's Eye View of the City of Mobile, Alabama, 1873,
Cincinnati, Ehrgotte T. Krebs, 1873.

Hamilton, Peter J., Art Work of Mobile and Vicinity, Chicago
W.H. Parish Publishing Co., 1894

Prepared by Linda Carroll
Student Historian
August 29, 1966
and
Charles A. Herrington
Architectural Historian
National Park Service
June 13, 1972

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

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A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This large commercial building divided in the center by a brick bearing wall and with identical facades on east and west fronts has distinct but minor variations in the treatment of the cast-iron bays on the lower floors, but identical treatment on the upper floors. The measured drawings prepared in conjunction with this report have emphasized the southern half with only bare dimensioning of the northern half.
2. Condition of fabric: Although the interior wood structure was generally solid, the brick masonry and cast-iron elements were in generally poor condition before demolition.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: As determined by the atreet pattern, this three-story building forms a rectangle measuring about 60' on the east and west fronts and 80'-9" on the south. The identical east and west facades are divided into eight equal bays and the long south facade into nine bays of unequal dimensions.
2. Foundations: not accessible
3. Wall construction, finish and color: Brick bearing walls are 24" thick on the first floor, exterior south wall, and 19" on the center bearing wall; on the second and third floors, the exterior south wall is 21" and the center wall 19". This center wall extends 1'-6" above the roof line and is 10" thick. On the first-floor east and west walk, there are brick piers faced with 3/4" cast-iron, supporting a cast-iron lintel.
4. Structural systems, framing: Second and third floor systems are 10" x 10" girders and beams, carrying 2½" x 14" joists (actual size) carried on 10" x 10" wooden posts (in the north half only). Roof framing consists of wooden trusses, spanning from the interior bearing wall to the exterior wall, spaced 13'-5" on center with bottom chord 6" x 10" and top chord 6" x 8". At midpoint of top chord is 3½" x 8" purlin carrying the roof rafters which are 3" x 6" spaced 2'-0" on center. These dimensions were taken in the north half which is exposed and accesible. It is assumed that the trusses and roof systems are identical on the south half which was

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not accessible.

5. Proches, stoops, balconies: On the east front facing Front Street there is a continuous balcony over the sidewalk supported on cast-iron columns. The railing is missing and the deck is now covered with roll roofing. it is said that buildings along this street had a continuous covered balcony which even crossed the side streets. There is evidence that a hipped roof existed over the balcony. The bays on the east and west wall rest on a continuous stoop with cast-iron tread, 5" above the sidewalk on the west and 9" on the east.
6. Chimneys: There are two brick chimneys on the south wall, one on the center bearing wall and one on the north party wall.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Although some bays have been bricked in and furnished with modern doors, the bays on the west front were originally identical. The bays are framed by $16\frac{1}{2}$ " x 18" rectangular cast-iron pilasters of a quasi-Tuscan order, identically treated except for the northernmost at the party wall which is 18" x 19" and has a different capital motif and plain facing. The face of the remaining pilasters is divided into two vertical inset panels between which is an escutcheon applied to the flat face. Edges of the pilasters are chamfered inside the panels and are at right angles beside the escutcheon. A cast-iron entablature supported by the pilasters spans the entire facade, consisting of architrave, plain frieze and moulded cornice. Within these general frames, the southern four bays have flattened arches in cast iron inserted between the entablature and the wood transom bar above the doors. Transom lights are missing and they are sealed with wood; however, there is a cast-iron latticework in the transoms, consisting of flat bars treated with rosettes at each intersection. In the north half of the building, the transoms are rectangular and filled with a vertical cast-iron grille. The typical door in all the openings is a double door, the lower section is a wood panel and the upper glazed with twelve unequal lights, end lights being $19\frac{1}{2}$ " x 6" and the middle lights $19\frac{1}{2}$ " x 12". Fitted into the front of the glazed panel is a top-hinged solid shutter of six panels with finger

grips recessed at the bottom rail. The two doorways on the south wall are similarly treated with the cast-iron pilasters forming jambs. These doorways have been altered into windows. Openings on the first-floor east facade are identical to those on the west, with the same bay treatment. ALA 49-MOB 145-

- b. Windows and shutters: Except for the floor length windows on the second floor of the east front, all windows are treated identically. They consist of round-headed double-hung wooden sash with six-over-six lights. The floor-length windows have six-over-nine lights. All windows have cast-iron head and sill trim, originally with brackets and with palmettes in the center of the hood moulding. The east windows on the south wall first floor are similar but have more ornate details in both head and sill. There is evidence that all windows were equipped with louvered shutters.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Each half of the building has a hipped roof offset from each other due to plan shape. They are covered with asphalt roll roofing.
- b. Cornice: A simple brick cornice with dentils formed by three brick headers enriches the three fronts of the building. Above is a low brick parapet with alternating recessed and projecting panels.
- c. Dormers, cupolas: none

C. Description of Interior: (south half only)

- 1. Floor plans: First floor: At the present time, this is a single large space in which a modern low-ceiling office has been framed in the southwest corner. A small space under the stairway has also been enclosed. At the east rear, there is a metal-plate vault in the southeast and a small toilet room in the northeast corner. The wood ceiling above has traces of what appears to be former partitions forming semi-octagonal rooms. Second floor: At the landing at the top of the stairs, there are two doors on the right, the first leading to a single large room, irregularly shaped, in the southwest corner of the building. The second door leads to a similar irregularly shaped room across the rear. There is a small room placed between these two rooms, with an

interior six-over-six light double-hung windows between it and the room to the west. A third door in the stair hall in line with the stairs leads to the stairs to the third floor, with risers beginning immediately inside the door. Third floor: One large room runs across the west front with several smaller rooms in the east rear.

2. Stairways: The first flight of stairs is relatively wide, enclosed between two plastered walls, the first-floor landing leading directly to the sidewalk outside. The second flight of stairs to the third floor is similarly enclosed, without landings at either end. The stair hall is lighted by a small diamond window above, borrowing light from the large room across the second floor (west room).
3. Flooring: The first floor is modern concrete, with an earlier concrete floor being visible at some places. Near the west front there are three curious cross-shaped insets of wood, spaced in line. Wide tongue-and-groove pine boards are used on the upper floors.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: On the first-floor walls are vertical tongue-and-groove pine boards with a simple moulding applied at wainscot height. The ceiling is beaded tongue-and-groove boards. All other walls, including stairways, are lime and hair plaster, except the west exterior wall which is exposed brick painted. Ceilings on the upper floors are beaded tongue-and-groove, as are the interior partitions.
5. Doorways and doors: The only notable doors are on the second floor. These are four-panelled wood, 3'-11" wide, with rails mortised and tenoned to stiles, and with three-light transoms above.
6. Trim: On the first floor, there is bare wainscoting and crown moulding, simply profiled. Trim on the other floors is plain.
7. Notable hardware: none
8. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Heating: There is a crude modern brick fireplace on the first floor south wall at the east end. On the second floor there are no fireplaces, but there is a plastered breastwork and the remains of a hearth over the location of the one on the first floor.

b. Lighting: Modern fluorescent and incandescent fixtures.

D. General setting and orientation: This building is located in an extensive nineteenth-century commercial and wharf district, and fronts the Mobile River and Front Street on the east, St. Francis Street on the south, and Commerce Street on the west. There are no outbuildings, walks or enclosures.

Prepared by Woodrow W. Wilkins
Supervising Architect
National Park Service
July 25, 1966

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were prepared as a cooperative project during the summer of 1966 between the Historic American Buildings Survey and various agencies, organizations, and individuals of the City of Mobile. The Historic American Buildings Survey supplied the project supervisor, Woodrow W. Wilkins, and three draughtsmen, Carl J. Rosenberg (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Michael R. Foil (Auburn University), and Lowell K. West (University of Kentucky). One draughtsman, Elbert L. Coleman (Alabama A & M), was provided by the Mobile Housing Board, which agency administers urban renewal. The services of an additional draughtsman, James Eley, specifically designated as an architectural student from Auburn University, were made possible by contributions from numerous local architects and businessmen. The Historic Mobile Preservation Society, in agreement with the History Department of Springhill College, provided a student historian, Linda Carroll. Office space was supplied by the City of Mobile through the City Planning Commission. Roy Thigpen, a local photographer, was contracted to supply the photographs. All local arrangements were made by the Mobile Historic Development Commission, Mrs. Nancy N. Holmes, President. The project was edited during the summer of 1972 by Charles A. Herrington, architectural historian, in a cooperative effort between the Historic American Buildings Survey and the Mobile Historic Development Commission.